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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000500

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [AF](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: KARZAI DELIGHTED AT SAUDI ARABIA VISIT

REF: RIYADH 0155

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Classified By: D/Ambassador Francis J. Ricciardone for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Karzai is "very happy" with his recent trip to Saudi Arabia, according to Karzai Chief of Staff Daudzai and reconciliation advisor Masoom Stanekazai, each of whom described the high-level attention Karzai received from Saudi leaders as a boost for Karzai and GIROA's standing in the region versus the Taliban. The trip also strengthened bilateral relations between the two countries. The Saudi king promised to consider Karzai's request for support on reconciliation and said that Saudi support was conditional on Karzai's developing a road map for peace and confirmation of the seriousness of the Taliban. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In separate one-on-one meetings with Ambassador Ricciardone on February 7, both Daudzai and presidential advisor Stanekzai characterized Karzai's Saudi Arabia trip as making a strong advance in Afghanistan's bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia, providing direct benefit to the standing of Karzai and GIROA in the region by refuting the Taliban claim that GIROA and Karzai are mere puppets under infidel occupation. While Saudi Arabia had in years past only dealt with Afghanistan via the "optic" of the Pakistani ISI, Stanekzai noted, Abdullah's perceived personal solicitude on this trip showed Pakistan, and all in the Gulf, that the Kingdom now deals with GIROA as a sovereign state. Both Karzai advisors noted that King Abdullah's decision to personally greet Karzai not only at the airport, but planeside, even arriving forty minutes before Karzai's plane arrived, represented what they perceived to be a significant honor for Karzai.

¶3. (C) Securing Saudi support for reconciliation efforts was a critical objective of Karzai's trip, and Daudzai reported that they thought the trip was successful in that regard. While Saudi Arabia had previously indicated interest in supporting reconciliation efforts, they were awaiting a formal request by Karzai before they would get involved, Daudzai said. Now that they have it, the Saudi king is "very keen" on the idea of supporting peace talks, Daudzai said, but was not yet ready to commit.

¶4. (S/NF) Daudzai said that in a private meeting with Karzai, the king requested that Karzai provide a detailed road map of his reconciliation plan for the Saudi government to review before making a commitment. King Abdullah also informed Karzai that he had been approached by a man named Hafizullah, who claimed to be a representative of the Taliban and who requested Saudi Arabia's assistance in arranging talks with the Afghan government. Preliminary Saudi intel reporting indicated that the man might be Pakistani, the king said. Abdullah would not respond to the "emissary," pending

Karzai's advice. Karzai promised to look into the case and report back if he had any further information.

¶5. (C) More broadly, both Daudzai and Stanekzai characterized the Saudi Arabia trip as representing a shift in Afghan-Saudi relations because Karzai was received in a manner they perceived as befitting an independent head of state -- indicating a significant development in the relationship between the two countries. Daudzai reported that a group of key princes had met in Riyadh prior to Karzai's arrival to discuss Saudi Arabia's approach to the Taliban problem. Noting what he saw as a change in mindset, Daudzai said the many princes who turned out to meet the Afghans this time (including Bandar, though Magrin was absent) now viewed Afghanistan as a credible counterpart with whom to work on issues like reconciliation. Previously, Saudi Arabia had couched their approach to Afghanistan in terms of whether they could count on Pakistan to be an ally. The Saudi princes are now more willing to engage directly with Afghanistan on critical issues like reconciliation, said Daudzai.

¶6. (C) Daudzai mentioned several ways in which he and Karzai felt the Saudis went out of their way to honor Karzai. In addition to Abdullah's planeside greeting, a step which Daudzai characterized as highly unusual (Note: Embassy Riyadh reports that Abdullah regularly greets visiting heads of state at the airport. End Note.), Abdullah awarded Karzai the King Abdul Aziz medal, the "highest" medal in Saudi Arabia, Daudzai claimed. Both Daudzai and Stanekzai categorized Saudi media coverage as significant and unusually detailed. For example, Daudzai claimed, the media reported lengthy and personally detailed biographical information on Karzai, "far more" than GIROA itself normally supplies, which much pleased Karzai.

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¶7. (C) Stanekzai said that the Saudis seemed determined during Karzai's trip to demonstrate their respect for Afghanistan as a sovereign Muslim state, rather than as an entity to be dealt with through the Pakistani prism. The 'umrah pilgrimage by Karzai and his delegation was one example: Daudzai, who had made the 'umrah with Karzai four years ago, reported that the protocol, king's solicitude, and media coverage this time were impressive, in contrast to the far lower visibility on the previous occasion. Some Saudis think of Afghanistan as being "run by a government of Jews and Christians," Stanekzai said, and Karzai's visit assured them that Afghanistan has legitimate Muslim leadership, highly respected by the Saudis. He hoped that, as a result, Saudis and other Gulf Arabs would now be less inclined to support Afghan insurgents with their "zakat," now that the Guardian has registered this message.
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